

## Cretacea & Other Stories from the Badlands

**Martin West**

Anvil Press (Sep 15, 2016)

Softcover \$20.00 (174pp)

978-1-77214-049-1

*His stories offer compelling insights into the denizens of the region and their complicated, hardscrabble lives.*

The stories in Martin West's impressive debut short-story collection take place in the Canadian province of Alberta, known here as "the Badlands." In this prairie environment, West's frequently demented characters hear "radio static cackling out of nowhere or bison bones snapping in the dry grass." Other bones appear as well, including dinosaur vertebrae dating back hundreds of thousands of years that grow out of the ground or appear on display in tawdry roadside attractions.

The desolate environment of the Badlands plays a recurring role in *Cretacea*. Gartner, in "Open Soil," collects samples of dirt, labeling them in separate jars ("Front lawn. Slightly earthy. Comforting smell. Probably good before bed for curing nightmares"). In "The Fetish," a young delivery boy named Edmund—on his way to a hopefully libidinous encounter with an older woman—encounters a dust devil in whose clutches "spun twig bark, hawk feathers, bobby pins, and a license plate from Manitoba."

The men and women living in this desolate and isolated region are often shown to be reckless, indigent, prone to deviant sexual behavior and, in general, destined to no good end. The narrator of the title story is inordinately fond of firearms yet manages to evade the authorities following a shooting spree that includes taking down "a store window with a garden gnome on display and a fourteen-foot plastic Triceratops that floated above one of the department stores." In other stories, characters use copious amounts of drugs, engage in autoerotic asphyxiation and, each in their own way, wreak havoc on people and property alike.

Two stories in *Cretacea* were featured in the prestigious Journey Prize Anthology, demonstrating a stark difference from other, more genteel Canadian authors. In the diction and cadence of West's prose, readers will encounter echoes of Flannery O'Connor and Barry Hannah.

But Martin West—who clearly knows the region inside and out—brings to the page a unique vision of life in the Badlands. His stories offer humor and pathos, as well as compelling insights into the denizens of the region and their complicated, hardscrabble lives.

LEE POLEVOI (Winter 2017)

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